

# A Socio-Cultural Interpretation of Bahamian Urban Architecture and Artifact

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James Bond & Junkanoo in *Thunderball*, 1965  
<http://1.bp.blogspot.com/-XvVH7MY7LcU/VKsMhOQavI/AAAAAAAE1gr/IN5ZpALola/s1600/007spectre-007thunderball002.jpg>

I have been a visiting associate professor of architecture at The College of The Bahamas, New Providence Island (soon to become The University of The Bahamas/UB serving the larger Caribbean region) this past academic year in tandem with a research project sponsored by U Cambridge. My main mission at COB was to help move a professional architectural degree programme forward for eventual NAAB accreditation and to teach architectural design to beginning undergraduate students, the majority of whom have a passion for a remarkable, indigenous urban ‘performing art’ festival called Junkanoo, which they shared with and closely involved me in--and to these students I owe, along with many of their instructors (one who died tragically during my tenure), the heart of this paper. Their undying advocacy for and commitment to a sustainable Junkanoo (see photos), for which they typically receive no remuneration, ‘independent study’ or other academic credit, almost renders the students’ art and design studies academic, and, in some ways, moot--should one have the opportunity to visit the extraordinary studios (a.k.a. ‘shacks’) in which these students apprentice and work, most often in stifling tropical heat intensified by high humidity and irksome fauna (a.k.a. rats).



At Work in the Studio ‘Shacks’, Nassau 2016

Given their creativity and productivity, the parallel design studios of the ‘shacks’, in my view, merit official incorporation within the university structure, with students allotted time and recognition for their participation and given encouragement to maintain this extraordinary ‘haute couture’ tradition in which the street is runway and dress nothing short of awe-inspiring—I would further suggest that participation could be mandatory for design students and integral to the art, crafts and architecture curriculum of the institution, and that this ‘hands-on’ internship pedagogy would attract many foreign as well as regional (Caribbean) students were it to be well marketed. And in a practical and parallel sense, additional income generated could be used to upgrade the studio ‘shacks’ as well as university studios and further the exploitation of solar energy towards affordable air conditioning for all in the islands. But I digress.



A look at the dynamics and history behind this traditional urban festival (not to be confused with the brassier Caribbean ‘Carnival’), ill-known to the world-at-large, and for which Bahamian artists, craftsmen, designers and architects prepare year-round, takes us back in time to the appalling era of slavery, when slaves at best were permitted only a 2-3 day/year ‘holiday’ from their thankless workload, and typically used this time to celebrate ‘Junkanoo’. There exist essentially two main theories about where the term ‘Junkanoo’ comes from and the origins of this characteristically masked, colourful celebration:

The origin of the word *junkanoo* is disputed. Theories include that it is named after a folk hero named John Canoe or that it derives from the French *gens inconnus* (unknown people) as masks are worn by the revelers.<sup>[3]</sup> Douglas Chambers, professor of African studies at the University of Southern Mississippi, suggests a possible Igbo origin from the Igbo yam deity *Njoku Ji* referencing festivities in time for the new yam festival. Chambers also suggests a link with the

Igbo *okonko* masking tradition of southern Igboland which feature horned maskers and other masked characters in similar style to jonkonnu masks....The festival may have originated several centuries ago, when slaves on plantations in The Bahamas celebrated holidays granted around Christmas time with dance, music, and costumes. After emancipation the tradition continued and junkanoo evolved from simple origins to a formal, organised parade with intricate costumes, themed music and official prizes within various categories.<sup>1</sup>

and

Legend has it that you haven't needed an excuse to party in The Bahamas for well over 500 years. But ask folks here at the top of the Caribbean how The Bahamas Junkanoo Tradition got started and they'll all tell you a different story; with many believing it was established by John Canoe, a legendary West African Prince, who outwitted the English and became a local hero; and others suspecting it comes from the French 'gens inconnus,' which translates as 'unknown' or 'masked people'.

The most popular belief, however, is that it developed from the days of slavery. The influx of Loyalists in the late 18th Century brought many enslaved people who were given three days off at Christmas, which they celebrated by singing and dancing in colourful masks, traveling from house to house, often on stilts. Junkanoo nearly vanished after slavery was abolished but the revival of the festival in The Bahamas now provides entertainment for many thousands.<sup>2</sup>

One cannot understand Nassau and other regional Bahamian urban centres without an in-depth appreciation of Junkanoo and how it has morphed over the years to tie into the larger cultural/Christian context of the independent Bahamas—per the nation's Declaration of Independence the only official Christian country in the world,<sup>3</sup> in contrast to the planet's many 'Islamic Republics'. The Urban Design Lab, in conjunction with IDB, TU Vienna and COB, and with whom I had the privilege of collaborating this past year, has proposed many remarkable design solutions for revitalizing downtown Nassau, which despite rich vernacular arts and crafts traditions has become a ghost town after dark except during these crowd-drawing Junkanoo festivities—two polarities with regard to 'density'. In the *Forward* from the Urban Design Lab's recent Nassau study, Gilberto Chona states:

Many cities across Latin America and the Caribbean share a common issue: the abandonment and underutilization of central areas or downtowns. In most cases, city centres are bustling with activity during the day, but become ghost towns during the night. This is the case of Nassau, a city where its downtown area, rich with historic landmarks and local treasures, becomes almost completely silent and vacant after sunset. This phenomenon is especially common in emerging cities where the inadequate use of tangible and intangible urban assets is juxtaposed with a rapid urban expansion towards suburbia. The revitalization of historic city centres and the recovery of the urban public realm are some of the most pressing urban challenges we face today in the region. As people and commercial developments have

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<sup>1</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Junkanoo> last accessed 5 July 2016

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.bahamas.co.uk/about/junkanoo/what-is-junkanoo> accessed 5 July 2016

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitutional\\_references\\_to\\_God](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitutional_references_to_God) accessed 4 August 2016



been moving to the sprawling suburbs, many (historic) city centres have fallen into decay. Nowadays, due to this abandonment, many downtowns are considered unsafe, unaffordable, and lacking in the amenities that have become ubiquitous in the suburbs. Downtowns are no longer places to live, and until we can reverse this tendency, they will continue to be undervalued cultural and economic assets hampering the overall sustainable development of these cities. The Urban Design Lab, as a component of the Emerging and Sustainable Cities Program, allows for the identification of such urban challenges and proposes tangible solutions by way of urban design projects within a broader urban strategy that also includes a proposed governance and management structure for the implementation of the projects. The participatory process of the UDL engages stakeholders and fosters buy-in from the community, adding to the projects' potential for being accepted, promoted, and maintained in the future by members of the Central Nassau communities. Revealed in this document, the UDL offers a packaged product, a solution that is comprehensive, feasible and most importantly, sustainable.<sup>4</sup>

It is my hypothesis that the positive impact Junkanoo, with all its mechatronics, 'robotics' and fanfare, has had and could potentially further have on the declining Bahamian urban fabric is largely underestimated because at present it is visible only on select days of the year, though preparations for Junkanoo are underway year-round, day-in and day-out, and no storage facility/major museum exists to archive the work and virtually no shops, including the famed Straw Market, sell the pieces, typically trashed from one year to the next. The Urban Design Lab, for instance, was not aware of Junkanoo until the festivity was called to their attention.



**Roots Costumes, January 1, 2016**

Some mini-Junkanoo events have happily been organized in the past few years to provide entertainment for tourists outside the traditional Junkanoo calendar. But were a large number of the Junkanoo studios/'shacks' to relocate to a tree-rich, shaded downtown Nassau and find homes in up-

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<sup>4</sup> Gilberto Chona, Lead Specialist Urban Development Economics and Regional Coordinator Emerging and Sustainable Cities Program (ESC), Housing and Urban Development Division (HUD), Climate Change and Sustainable Development Department, Inter-American Development Bank, [https://issuu.com/rolandkrebs7/docs/nassau\\_screen](https://issuu.com/rolandkrebs7/docs/nassau_screen), last accessed 8 August 2016

market, solar powered air-conditioned facilities open to all (possibly behind transparent glass walls for easy visitor viewing)—initially sponsored by celebrities, foundations and government agencies—both locals and tourists would indubitably benefit enormously. Provisions to protect design confidentiality and ‘copyright’ might be made, although there is nothing at present prohibiting visits to neighbouring studios or ‘shacks’, most located just south of downtown in the ‘ghetto’ as locals affectionately call Grants Town and Bain Town—except for anonymity and cultural mores.

In this author’s view there is currently not much for either cruise ship visitors/tourists or locals alike to ‘see’ downtown apart from a few historic sites and museums left over from the British Colonial era, and shopping has become unappealing due to the ubiquitous malls aboard the cruise ships, parity of fare, high prices and again, relocation of indigenous shopping centres to more suburban areas. However, were the artifacts from Junkanoo typically discarded after each parade (see photos below) to be rescued, recycled and put on sale or exhibit, along with upgrading ‘merchandise’ (to include quality local arts and crafts—e.g. products by the design company, Hello-Lovey Inc., as well as Junkanoo artifacts) in architect-designed galleries and shops as well as the local downtown Straw Market—Nassau would unquestionably become significantly more interesting. And in conjunction with year-round, visible and possibly participatory design activity in relocated Junkanoo studio shacks (reinforcing indigenous Bahamian identity)—implemented alongside the remarkable housing, park, transport and recreational solutions proposed by UDL (Urban Design Lab), Nassau could easily become a hive of bustling activity again, day and night. In sum, I argue that Junkanoo has been undervalued as a catalyst for social change and urban renewal.

While ‘familiarity breeds contempt’, the reasons for this quandary are manifold. From a socio-cultural point of view it is helpful to remember that for well over a hundred years Junkanoo was, after all, a largely clandestine phenomenon involving masks and costumes to conceal both identity and, oddly, authorship (and possibly murder according to some traditions!)—and it was strictly part of an indigenous black culture not only undervalued but largely denigrated by the Colonial whites. So there has been little outside encouragement if only because Junkanoo has remained a fairly unheard-of and ill-publicized operation at the international level, despite it being featured in films like *Thunderball* (1965) and *After the Sunset* (2004). Large design collaboratives or groups, formed from the 1950’s onwards (mostly by teenagers), such as the Saxons, Roots and Valley Boys, compete annually and fiercely for a host of prizes.



**Designers COB Student Anthony Bain and Father**

Similarly, many remarkable socially-minded Bahamian architects have ostensibly been largely ignored by the local ‘powers that be’ as agents for social change, including the late Jackson Burnside, who had been mentored by U Penn’s Louis Kahn, and whose scheme for the COB Library was ultimately rejected, along with many colleagues at COB and the University of The West Indies such as Andre Braynen, Michael Diggess, Amos Ferguson, Henry Hepburn and Anthony Jervis, to name a few. The Institute of Bahamian Architects has an active membership.



**Discarded Junkanoo Pieces, January 2016**

The Bahamian Government and foreign developers, for want of design savvy and/or design education, and given various ‘hidden’ political and economic agendas, largely depend on outside



architectural firms when it comes to major projects like airports and resorts (e.g. Atlantis or Albany)—a lamentable trend which has either destroyed, commercialized, or ignored local culture when there is so much to be sustainably and respectfully built upon, re-interpreted and preserved. Alongside the Christian values upheld in the Bahamian Declaration of Independence, the islands are also ripe with sinister real-life Agatha Christie sagas like the well-known Harry Oakes murder, to this day ‘unsolved’ though most commonly linked to the Mafia, HG Christie, the Duke of Windsor (‘banished’ to The Bahamas during World War II) and/or the Bahamian casino industry.<sup>5</sup>

In conjunction with the dearth of local design input and cultural sponsorship as catalysts for social change, the Bahamas has one of the largest concentrated populations of ultra-rich celebrities (e.g. Oprah Winfrey, Tiger Woods, Joe Lewis, Mariah Carey, Sean Connery and others) who, given their lack of engagement, ostensibly feel quite comfortable living alongside rampant poverty in luxury and tax-free privilege, sponsoring foreign high design initiatives while ignoring indigenous basic needs such as urban revitalization, affordable housing, or an official local design school, to name a few. COB Dean Carlton Watson suggests that the key to successful national development lies in creating sound organizational structure and healthy priorities in managing the nation’s abundant resources, which I would expand to include responsive civic celebrity engagement (possibly in exchange for residency rights).



**Bahamian ‘Haute Couture’**

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<sup>5</sup> Houts, Marshall, *King's X: Common Law and the Death of Sir Harry Oakes*, Morrow, 1972.

By way of encouraging local design talent, COB President Rodney D. Smith asked Architectural Design students to develop schemes for a ‘signature’ art center/school for the new urban Bahamas’ university this past year—a hands-on ‘live’ project to which the students responded admirably given the very short production time allotted them, and not surprisingly given the islands’ creative design culture, readily reflected in their colourful and elegant work. SMPT Chair Philip Armbrister and Tech’s HOD Wallace Turner further promoted the model by asking first year students to redesign the entry area of their ageing building—an inspiring responsibility for young, would-be architects.



**COB Art Center Proposal by Year 2 Students Athena Constantakis and Errin Francis**



To date the socio-cultural dimensions of Bahamian urban architectural design and artifact reflect expressive, creative free thinking in response to a history of oppression and domination, informing the Bahamian path to independence (1973) which, against all odds, has placed the 700+ island nation in a position to positively impact not just the region but the world at large, purely through design culture. It is this author's recommendation that the archipelago market itself for the design hub it is and as founder of a 'New Modern Caribbean Style'.



**COB Art Center Proposal by Year 2 Students Kevaughn Ellison and Jordan Williams**



By way of expounding on how the islands' vernacular architecture has been informed (and continues to be) by Junkanoo, sometimes syncretically with the British Colonial era, I include a few photographic images of indigenous built form and art depicting architecture below. As mentioned earlier, it should be noted that these striking works coincide with extreme poverty—‘shanty town’ housing units with one outhouse per block—and are somewhat atypical in and of themselves.



**Compass Point Resort, New Providence**



**Harbour Island, Ornamental Detail (Village House)**



**Anthony Jervis Architectural Office, Nassau**

<http://jervisarchitect.com/14west%20street%20Photo.htm>



**Jackson Burnside III, Jacaranda House**

<https://jacarandahousenassau.com/2011/05/13/jackson-burnside-iii/>



**Half Moon Cay Resort**

<http://www.cruiseportinsider.com/hmex19.html>



**Converted Sugar Mill**

<http://www.reginayacht.com/Regina-Cruise-Caribbean-Antigua-St-Martin.pdf>



While tourism is the driving industry, ‘finance’ (tax-sheltered fund protection and manipulation) is a close second, the ethics of which have yet to be challenged with a scandal such as the ‘Panama Papers’. It could be argued that much of the up-market built environment and real estate investment in the Bahamas is a front for or byproduct of money-laundering and/or tax evasion:

The Commonwealth of The Bahamas is an important regional and offshore financial center. The economy of the country is heavily reliant upon tourism, tourist-driven construction, and the offshore financial sector. The Bahamas remains a transit point for illegal drugs bound for the United States and other international markets. The major sources of laundered proceeds are drug trafficking, gun trafficking, illegal gambling, and human smuggling. There is a significant black market for smuggled cigarettes and guns. Money laundering trends include the purchase of real estate, large vehicles, boats, and jewelry, as well as the processing of money through a complex web of legitimate businesses and international business companies (IBCs) registered in the offshore financial sector. Drug traffickers and other criminal organizations take advantage of the large number of IBCs and offshore banks registered in The Bahamas to launder significant sums of money, despite strict know-your-customer and transaction reporting requirements.<sup>6</sup>

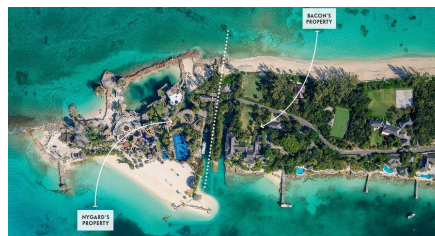
Insofar as aesthetics often play a secondary role to the money-laundering dimension of foreign real estate investment, it can be argued that much of contemporary architecture in New Providence (which has been so over-developed as to be almost entirely ‘urban’) represents bling rather than taste. Peter Nygard’s estate in Lyford Cay is often held as a prime example of the phenomenon (amusingly Nygard keeps augmenting his sandy beachfront with dredging at his neighbours’ expense<sup>7</sup>), while the Lyford Cay Clubhouse purports to represent ‘established wealth’:



<https://connerglobal.com/tag/lyford-cay-bahamas/>



[http://media.vanityfair.com/photos/56620827b587f921319e97ad/master/w\\_900,c\\_limit/lyford-cay-billionaire-battle-bahamas-06.jpg](http://media.vanityfair.com/photos/56620827b587f921319e97ad/master/w_900,c_limit/lyford-cay-billionaire-battle-bahamas-06.jpg)



<http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/12/peter-nygard-louis-bacon-legal-battle-bahamas>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2014/vol2/222685.htm> last accessed 26 August 2016

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.vanityfair.com/news/2015/12/peter-nygard-louis-bacon-legal-battle-bahamas> last accessed 27 August 2016





**Lyford Cay Clubhouse Interior**

<https://in.pinterest.com/pin/24488391702121448/>

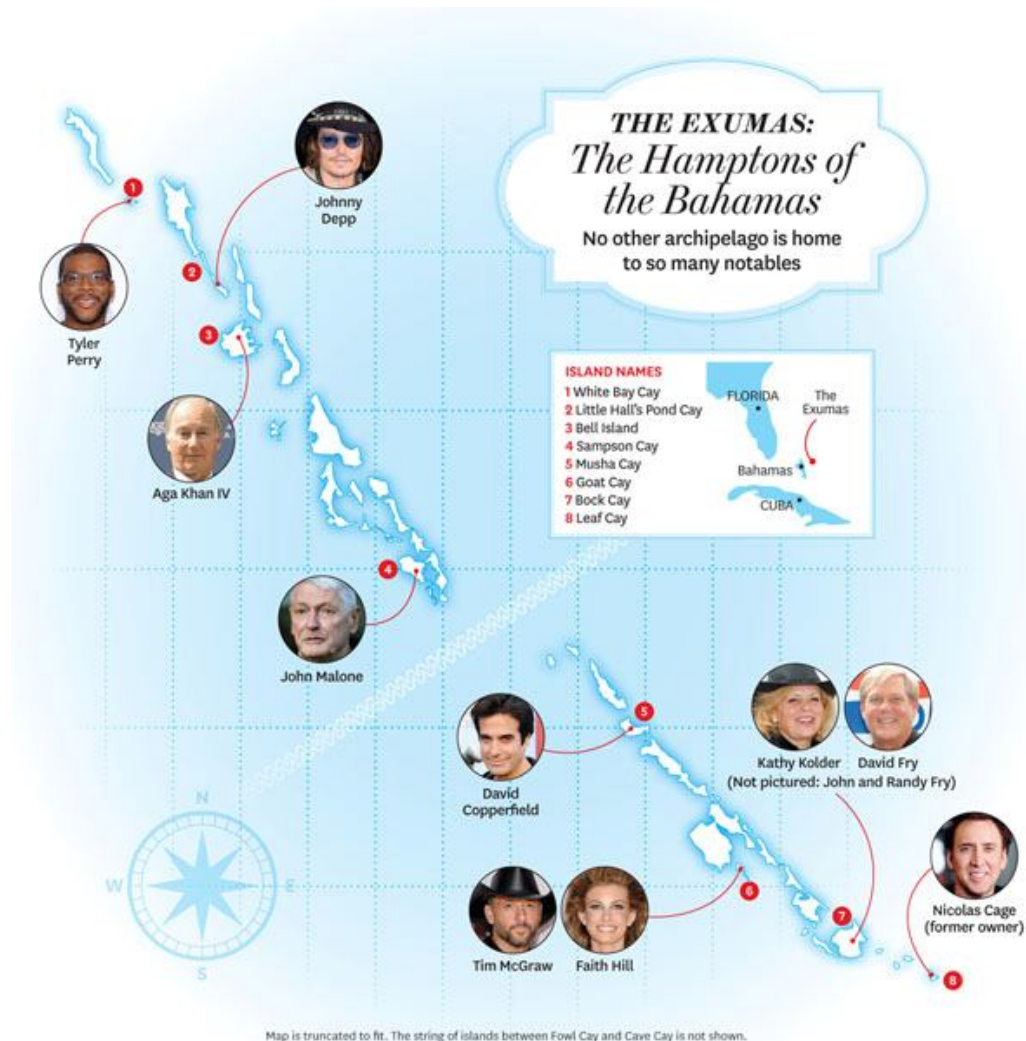


<http://www.globalcitymap.com/caribbean/central-america-caribbean-map.html>

The celebrities mentioned earlier all own lavish estates on at least one of the islands if not their own island—the list is endless and further implicated are Eddie Murphy, Michael Jordan, Bill Gates, Johnny Depp, Nicolas Cage, the Aga Khan, and Mike Oldfield, to name a few.<sup>8</sup> Images of their estates and/or islands are readily found on the Internet via Google.

At press time (July 2013), Beyonce and Jay-Z were reportedly in the process of inking a deal worth approximately \$3 million to purchase Strangers Cay in the northern Bahamas.

Hollywood royalty Johnny Depp...fell in love with the Exumas when filming *Pirates of the Caribbean* and purchased Little Hall's Pond Cay in 2004 for a reported \$3.6 million. The idyllic island is ringed with numerous sun-soaked beaches all named after Depp's close friends and family—Gonzo Beach is dedicated to the late Hunter S Thompson; Brando Beach, named for his idol Marlon Brando; and Paradis, Lily Rose and Jack beaches, named for his former partner Vanessa Paradis and their two children. The island also sports a snorkelling spot called Heath's Place for the late actor, Heath Ledger.<sup>9</sup>



<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/sites/default/files/custom/islands.html.jpg>

<sup>8</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_residents\\_of\\_the\\_Bahamas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_residents_of_the_Bahamas) last accessed 27 August 2016

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.thebahamasinvestor.com/2013/celebrity-islands/> last accessed 27 August 2016



So why is there poverty in the islands? And is it really fashionable these days to hoard such wealth alongside obvious great need? The desire to escape the stress of urban life or to protect one's wealth from prying eyes (no longer possible today with the Internet and Google Earth in any event) and/or taxation exemplifies a socio-cultural dynamic one could interpret very simply as greed or, even, evil.

Finally, one must ask why the Bahamian Government allows the 'urbanization' of its islands if so little of the wealth is reaching its poor (despite the Aga Khan's 'diplomatic' engagement of Harvard Graduate School of Design to produce a 'sustainability' study to help protect The Exumas--which most concretely resulted in the fabrication of some chicken coops).<sup>10</sup> It is safe to assume that some of the wealth is reaching somebody. For example, it is a well-known fact that Lynden Pindling spent some 60 million USD more than he made while in office from 1967-1992 as prime minister.<sup>11</sup> 'A review of Pindling's personal finances by the Commission (of Inquiry) found that he had spent eight times his reported total earnings from 1977 to 1984. According to the Inquiry: "The prime minister and Lady Pindling have received at least \$57.3 million in cash. Explanations for some of these deposits were given... but could not be verified."' <sup>12</sup> Yet the government-run College of The Bahamas does not have enough funding to ensure its faculty sabbatical leave so they can see what's going on in the rest of the world, routinely fix outdated/defunct air-conditioning units or introduce solar-powered energy to its campuses, let alone provide a decent cafeteria with nutritious food for its students and staff or meet basic health and safety standards, among other wants, despite the Christian values upheld in its Constitution. As in much of the 'third world', corruption is a key impediment to sustainable development--and rarely identified as such.



<http://antonyz.com/portfolio/architecture/>

<sup>10</sup> [http://takimag.com/article/wilderness\\_for\\_sale\\_hargreaves\\_allen/print](http://takimag.com/article/wilderness_for_sale_hargreaves_allen/print) & <http://sustainableexuma.org/> last accessed 29 Aug 2016

<sup>11</sup> Hiaasen, Carl and McGee, Jim, *A Nation For Sale: Corruption in The Bahamas*, October 10, 1984

<sup>12</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illegal\\_drug\\_trade\\_in\\_the\\_Bahamas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illegal_drug_trade_in_the_Bahamas) last accessed 27 August 2016